

Unlearning - An essential power skill to develop as a Project Manager¹

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Introduction

Learning anything in life requires an open mind. As project managers, we need to be open to new ideas. Reflect on how many assumptions, techniques, knowledge, and perceptions you have relied on that are no longer practical or relevant in today's project world. Most of us are unaware of our mindset and perceptions; we employ them and remain in our pilot in our everyday lives. The illiterate of the 21st century will not be those who cannot read and write but those who cannot learn, unlearn, and relearn.

Choosing an alternative paradigm

Unlearning is not about forgetting. It's about the ability to choose an alternative mental model or paradigm. We add new skills or knowledge to what we already know when we learn. When we unlearn, we step outside the cognitive model to choose a different one. As project managers, we are used to initiating, planning, monitoring, controlling, and closing projects. More and more AI substitutes the planning and tracking, resource assignment, and reporting activities done by AI software. It is amazing how many products have come to the market during the last three years, and it is a train that will not stop.

So, we, as project managers, need to be focused on managing people, building relationships, using our influence, and practicing emotional intelligence. Every project manager needs to move towards learning, unlearning, and relearning new things. Many of the things we learned some years ago are not valid today for several reasons; please reflect upon that. Our focus needs to be people.

See what happens in our brain when we learn, unlearn, and relearn in Figure 1.

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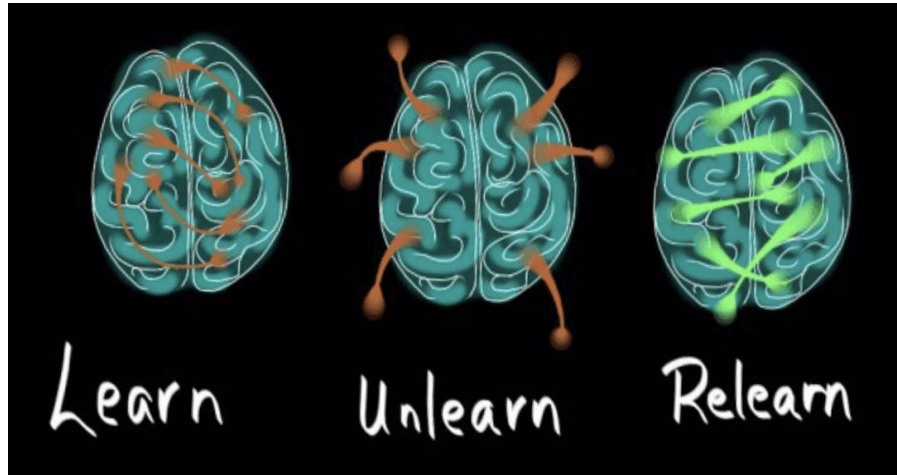


Figure 1. Brain diagram showing the effect of Learn, Unlearn, and Relearn

For example, I (Bucero) rented a car several years ago to travel to the UK. I had never driven this kind of car before, so I had to learn the placement of the various controls. I also had to know how to drive on the left side of the road. All of that was relatively easy. The hard part was *unlearning* how to drive on the right. I had to keep telling myself to “stay left.” It’s why crosswalks in London remind pedestrians to “look right.” It’s difficult to unlearn the mental habits that no longer serve us. Another example is that most project managers started managing projects following a unique approach (Waterfall); now, organizations need to understand the different project management approaches and be supported by project managers to select the right approach to manage their projects.

I (Englund) used to make presentation in typical lecture style. I soon found that audiences wanted to interact, ask questions, and share ideas among themselves. I needed to change my approach and that led to being a more effective trainer.

We are evolving from formal hierarchies to fluid networks in the organizational context. But this requires a substantial amount of unlearning. Our instinct is to think of an organization as an organizational chart. We automatically escalate decisions to the boss. I often hear executives talk about being “more networked,” but what they really mean is collaborating across the silos. Becoming a networked organization requires decision principles that create alignment and autonomy. However, this requires unlearning in management, leadership, and governance. See Figure 2.



Figure 2. Playing with a puzzle represents the process of Learn, Unlearn, and Relearn

In the project management context, we are observing that we have more and more tools that can automate activities like planning development, resource assignment, monitoring, control, and report generation when managing projects, being a great help for the project manager. Hence, they need to focus more on the people side of project management. We are not talking about forgetting what we learned but being more effective when using our time to manage projects.

Our suggested process

1. **Identify and recognize** that the old mental model is no longer relevant or practical. This situation is challenging because we are usually unconscious of our mental models. We might be afraid to admit that the existing model is growing outdated. We have built our reputations and careers by mastering these old models. We have studied and educated in schools and universities that way. Many of us are scared of that situation, and letting go can seem like starting over and losing our status, authority, or sense of self.
2. **They are finding or creating a new model** that can better achieve our goals. At first, you will probably see this new model through the lens of the old. Many companies are ineffective in using social media because they still consider it a message distribution channel. They haven't made the mental shift from one-to-many to many-to-many. Social is best thought of as a context rather than a channel. So, we need to evolve our mindset towards a new model.
3. **You are incorporating the new mental habits.** This process differs from creating a new behavioral habit, like your diet or golf swing. The tendency will be to fall back into the old way of thinking and, therefore, the old way of doing. It's helpful to create triggers that alert you to which model you are working from. For example, when talking about your customers, catch yourself when you call them

“consumers” — this corresponds to a transactional mindset. Find a word that reflects a more collaborative relationship. The shift in language helps to reinforce the change in attitude.

Summary

- The good news is that practicing unlearning will make it easier and quicker to shift as your brain adapts. (It’s a process called neuroplasticity.)
 - Learning anything in life requires an open mind. As project managers, we need to be open to new ideas.
 - “We cannot solve our problems with the same thinking we used when we created them” (Albert Einstein).
 - Unlearning is not about forgetting. It’s about the ability to choose an alternative mental model or paradigm.
 - The old mental model is no longer relevant or practical.
 - We are finding or creating a new model and need to achieve our goals.
 - We need to incorporate new mental habits.
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About the Authors



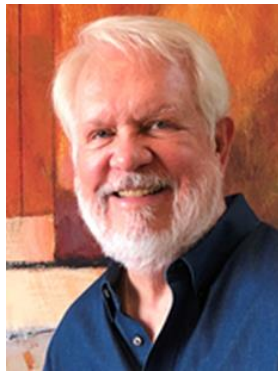
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Alfonso has a Computer Science Engineering degree from Universidad Politécnica in Madrid and a Ph.D. in Management from the ISM University. He has 39 years of practical experience and is actively advancing the PM profession in Spain and Europe. Alfonso received the *PMI Distinguished Contribution Award* on October 9, 2010, the *PMI Fellow Award* on October 22, 2011, and the *PMI Eric Jenett Excellence Award* on October 28, 2017. You can contact Mr. Bucero at alfonso.bucero@abucero.com.



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Randall L. Englund, MBA, NPDP, CBM believes all leaders need to create healthy environments for people to consistently and sustainably achieve project success. Sponsors can do a better job of guiding and supporting project teams, and project managers can expand their people skills.

Randall offers keynote talks, consulting, professional facilitation, executive education, and advanced training services to people in management, managing projects, and working on project teams. His approach includes the behavioral, technical, business, and change management aspects that create an environment for project success. The goal is to get greater, optimized results from projects underway or contemplated in the organization. An organic approach to implementing project, program, and portfolio management taps the inherent power of people to work in harmony, have fun, and be more productive.

Randy provides management and leadership awareness through presentations, workshops, seminars, consulting engagements, books, conference papers, blogs, and online University courses. His experiences stem from 22 years at Hewlett-Packard, as a senior project manager in a corporate Project Management Initiative, and as a seminar leader for the Project Management Institute. He was awarded the PMI Distinguished Contributions Award in 2013 as well as Eric Jenett Award of Excellence in 2018.

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